

PLACES FAR AWAY, PLACES VERY NEAR

Mauthausen, the camps of the Shoah, and
the bystanders

Gordon J. Horwitz

The majority of the estimated 300 million people under German rule during the Holocaust were neither victims of the camps nor perpetrators. They were bystanders of various degrees and types. Some belonged to Greater Germany, and their kin were either fighting for Hitler or running his camps. Others belonged to Germany's allies, and more likely than not were more supportive of the partnership with the Third Reich in the early phases of the war than toward the end. Others still belonged to the occupied nations, and stood a good chance of becoming victims themselves, especially if they resisted Nazi policies or tried to protect those slated for extermination. But by and large, those who did not carry out genocide and related atrocities, and those who were not subjected to these policies, namely, the vast majority of German-occupied Europe's population, mostly watched in silence or did their best not to see at all. If, as Mao Tse-tung claimed, the guerrilla fighter must feel like a fish in the sea, so too, the perpetrators of genocide must feel that their environment, if not supportive of their actions, is either indifferent or sufficiently terrorized not to dare to act against them. Genocide cannot take place without a majority of passive bystanders.

The great merit of this chapter by Gordon J. Horwitz is that he provides us with a detailed picture not merely of the existence of bystanders within earshot of the camps, but also of their crucial role in the functioning of such institutions. The case that he examines, one of the worst camps the Nazis ever built, is an excellent example of how empty the claim of ignorance of Nazi crimes, so often repeated after the war, really was. For the camp was not built in isolation from the population, but right next to it. Nor was Mauthausen the only such camp. Auschwitz was right next to the town of Oswiecim, Majdanek on the outskirts of Lublin, Buchenwald close to Weimar, Dachau next to Munich, and so forth. These camps depended to a large extent on the towns next to which they were built for supplies, housing and entertainment, while the towns benefited from the presence of the camps' personnel

for their own economy. The bystanders in these cases were not an anonymous mass of indifferent people, but an active part of the camps' operation. The only difference being that the often amicable relationship between bystanders and camp guards (especially but not exclusively in Germany and Austria) did not extend to the inmates, who were at the same time dying in their thousands, normally after being reduced to a state barely recognizable as human. It is this necessary, indeed essential, link between atrocity and normality that Horwitz's chapter portrays so powerfully.

We turn to the world of the ghettos and concentration camps and we imagine we are on a journey to a world apart, a world far away. You and I are not the first to think in these terms. Images of a distant and forbidding realm occupied the thoughts of those who first set foot in these places. One thinks of Jan Karski, envoy of the Polish government-in-exile, on a clandestine journey into the Warsaw ghetto in October 1942. His story, repeated decades later before the camera for Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, was told in print as early as 1944. To enter the ghetto he was led through a doorway and then, by way of a cellar passage, he emerged on the other side, inside the Jewish zone. "Indeed, at that time, the building had become like a modern version of the River Styx which connected the world of the living with the world of the dead."¹ He described the terrifying sight of the persons he encountered inside the ghetto. He found people, "the shadows of what had once been men or women," who "flitted by" crazed with starvation, "enveloped in a haze of disease and death through which their bodies appeared to be throbbing in disintegration." He came upon bodies left unattended, unclothed in the streets because, he was told, their families could not afford to bury them. His guides, a pair of Jewish leaders—"two dejected shadows" who "seemed like apparitions," he had earlier described them—told him not to worry, as the ghetto dwellers, just barely alive, passed before him. "They are dying, that's all," they said, "they are dying." Yet they urged him, above all, to "remember, remember."²

Overwhelmed, after a brief stay, he said he had to leave. He described running through the streets of the ghetto, not because he was being pursued, but because he wished to get away; he could stand no more. He returned to the secret passage and entryway and departed. He was on a trip to the land of the dead, and from that realm of the shades he reemerged on the other side of the wall. "It was not a world," Karski said, groping for words to describe this fantastic city within a city that was beyond his imagination. "It was not a part of humanity. I was not part of it. I did not belong there."³

Karski was not alone in being initially unprepared to fit the ghettos and the camps into a picture of the world of common experience. When the concentration camps were liberated and open to view, the soldier-liberators and those who came in their wake could hardly believe their eyes.⁴ This realm was unlike any known to humankind. Few could enter without experiencing something akin to Karski's reaction to the Warsaw ghetto, seeking as soon as possible to flee. In May 1945 a priest from the Austrian town of Ebensee entered the camp of this name, a subsidiary of Mauthausen, in order to minister to the sick; he confessed he was appalled at the assault upon his senses, the smell of the bodies stacked in or near the crematorium, the wretched odors emanating from bodies still alive, the sight of human wrecks dragging themselves forward, begging for some food, for a warm gesture. Following a stay inside the camp, the priest

describes how, once at home, fearing infection, he washed his hands in a strong disinfectant. He could hardly believe that this lovely town of Ebensee where he had been raised, nestled picturesquely amid the hills and lakes of the scenic Salzkammergut, home to forests and luxurious grazing land, had been simultaneously the setting of this horrific institution, the concentration camp of Ebensee. "This screaming contradiction," as he termed it, had altered the world as he knew it. Prompting the priest's despair was the displacement of long-cherished images of this setting so close to his heart, so evocative of nature and family, by the things he witnessed in the aftermath of the liberation.⁵ He was being forced to admit that that place, the concentration camp of Ebensee, was not far away, not distant, but very near.

In the opening sequence of his film, Claude Lanzmann presents his viewers with an image of Simon Srebnik, survivor of Chełmno, seated in a boat. An oarsman, standing, silently ferries him past the Polish village of Chełmno along the placid River Ner, river of ashes, river of time, back to the land of the dead he had miraculously escaped as a child. We are meant to sense, at least at first, the remoteness of this place to which one journeys by water, and whose silence is the absent voice of the dead. That silence is broken by Srebnik's song, a soldier's tune, a song of the executioners, a haunting echo of the killers and a lullaby of death. The last trip by river lies at the heart of one of our oldest and most moving representations of death. But ultimately, the metaphor proves inadequate to describe what happened to people who were forced to journey to these places. For, as we discover, this place far away is not deserted. The villagers of what seems to many of us a place remote in time as well as space are still here, just as they had been when Chełmno was the site of a death camp. We learn that Chełmno was, and that it is still a place on earth, locatable on the map, a place populated by the living as well as by the dead.

Let there be no confusion: these places *were* repellent. They did have about them, quite literally, the sight and stench of death. The camps were a unique synthesis of sordid imaginings and very real exercise of man-made violence and force. They were places into which perfectly whole human beings were driven, held briefly between life and death before being beaten, or hung, or shot, or electrocuted on the wire, or gassed, then burned and blown through a chimney into the sky. The scope of the undertaking alone was enough to create among outsiders a sense of incredulity. That incredulity was one manifestation of a system designed to create a division in society between a normal world, inhabited by the citizenry, and a "phantom world," to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase, into which the outcasts of society would slip before exiting this world without a trace.⁶

Even so, the project to seal from observation, to isolate the killing from the outside world, to wipe free all traces of lives destroyed and to screen the deeds of the killers, was an imperfect endeavor. In 1938 a concentration

camp was built in Mauthausen, a market community on the Danube, fourteen miles east of Linz. For the next seven years the camp spread its shadow over the town and its inhabitants. As the original camp expanded to include a network of more than forty outlying, subsidiary camps, the shadow fell across additional towns and villages that dotted the landscape. The shadow represented torment and death for more than 100,000 individuals swept into the Mauthausen system over seven years. Much of that torment was visible to persons who lived in the vicinity of these camps. They were witness to repeated beatings and shootings. Their eyes saw what few eyes would have wished to see. Assuredly, they were spared the worst of sights: few were given the dubious privilege of witnessing the gassing of inmates. The masters of the camp, the SS, were at pains to keep residents somewhat in the dark concerning the extent and the details of the killing. But it was impossible for them to keep all of their doings a complete mystery to the townsfolk. Rather, they asked of the residents both a discreet silence, a tactful averting of their gaze. Through tacit understanding, though all knew it to be in fact near and present, the camp was to be considered a realm distant and apart.

One of the first notions to be grasped in considering the relationship between a concentration camp and the town and townspeople nearby, is to understand how, in numerous ways, a concentration camp touches upon the affairs of the citizenry. A concentration camp such as Mauthausen can be likened to a new enterprise locating in a given community. The comparison is particularly apt in the case of a camp such as Mauthausen because, quite above and beyond its planned role as a center of torture and death, it was designed as an economic enterprise centering on the extraction of granite from rock quarries, operating for the benefit of an SS-owned and operated corporation, the German Earth and Stone Works. That enterprise profited from the exploitation of slave labor in the form of inmates brought to Mauthausen to be worked to death. The Mauthausen quarry, an imposing and frightful pit whose walls ranged some 300 feet in height round about, was at once an enclave of terror and a work site. For these same quarry operations, for example, local stone masons were needed to carry out skilled tasks as well as to serve as foremen on labor details which were simultaneously under SS guard. During Mauthausen's establishment phase, for example, barracks were built and outfitted, and civilian carpenters were called in from the surrounding communities to do some of the work. In operation, the camp needed basic supplies, and for these it turned to area merchants. Regular food purchases were made from nearby farmers and from an agricultural cooperative located near the railway station. Goods had to be trucked in, and here too a local firm was engaged to provide vehicles and drivers. The camp staff also liked to drink and dine out, frequenting local taverns and restaurants. SS families were housed in the community, and local women took on housekeeping duties, tidying SS

residences. Local merchants were a ready source of necessities for the SS and their families. In short, there was on one level a routine, everyday quality to the interaction between the camp and the town.⁷

Still, the nature of contacts, for some, evolved beyond the everyday to a level more direct and sinister. In the early phase of the camp's existence, before such facilities were installed on site, inmates who died at Mauthausen were routinely shipped for disposal to a public crematorium in Steyr, a city to the south of Mauthausen. We are also informed of the case of a small businessman from Linz, owner of a commercial extermination firm, who acted as a supplier of deadly Zyklon-B to the camp.⁸ Moreover, a number of local persons representing a variety of trades and professions—ranging from simple mechanics, plumbers, and bus drivers, to secretaries and nurses and doctors—served in the so-called euthanasia center at Castle Hartheim, located just west of Linz. Hartheim operated not only as a center for killing, first, by means of carbon monoxide gas, mentally ill and physically infirm patients from Austria and southern Germany, but also, beginning in August 1941, inmates from the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Dachau. Hartheim thus doubled as a killing outpost for Mauthausen, its own gas chamber a forerunner to the gas chamber installed in Mauthausen and operating by the spring of 1942. Local persons, many sharing Nazi party connections, carried out the task of assembling the pipes, the tiles, and the doors of the gas chamber in Castle Hartheim. Custodians kept the physical plant in running order; bus drivers drove the victims to the castle; nurses met the vehicles and escorted the victims inside, readying them for the gas chamber; secretaries carried out correspondence informing loved ones of the death of their relatives in Hartheim, processing false information concerning the cause of death; above all, overseeing these activities, were the doctors. When gassing was completed, local men assigned to the crematory carried out the heavy task of stacking and then disposing of the bodies in the oven they serviced.⁹

Local businessmen not only profitably took on contracts for services rendered to the camp but exploited the availability of cheap labor rented out from the SS slave pool. Beyond this, however, there were opportunities for corruption and enrichment. The adjacent black market included the exchange of rare foodstuffs for valuables seized from the inmates themselves. In particular, items such as watches of silver and gold, skimmed from the treasure house of items taken from the inmates (and in the case of much of the gold, literally routinely wrenched from their teeth), served in Mauthausen and in other camps as items for barter with persons from the local population.¹⁰ Yitzhak Arad recounts extensively instances of this trade at Treblinka. He estimates that easily more than a thousand boxcars of property were loaded and shipped from the camp. But not all of the loot was funneled into the "proper" channels. Rather, some guards had valuables smuggled out of the camp to nearby Malkinia, where they could expropriate

it and return with the goods to Germany when on leave. Farmers in the vicinity of Treblinka were said to have been seen with these watches stuffed into their baskets. Guards took advantage of their access to the expanding pile of wealth, providing a windfall for greedy area residents, including "farmers' daughters" near Treblinka who went out with the guards and received these stolen goods.¹¹ Soon after the war, civilians could be found rooting about the former camp terrain, digging up remains in a frantic search for what was presumed to be buried loot scattered among the human remains. Observing evidence of this treasure hunt, Rachel Auerbach, a Jewish investigator with a team examining Treblinka in November 1945 appropriately described these people as human "jackals and hyenas" who would "drag parts of half-rotted corpses from the earth, bones and scattered refuse in the hope that they may come upon at least a coin or a gold tooth."¹²

The people living round about had to see to it that even should an inmate escape, not only would he be turned away, but turned in by a hostile population. In the event of breakouts, the local citizenry were to be the eyes and ears of the guard corps. In Sobibor, in Treblinka, mass escapes did occur. Nothing is more damning to the reputation of the outside world as is the indifference and, above all, the hostility of persons in the surrounding areas where the escaped prisoners sought assistance. In Poland, Jewish prisoners had to evade denunciations and tip-offs by the local citizenry to the Germans. Few Polish partisans came to their assistance. Some killed escaped Jews on their own.¹³

What is more, just as the German army units were on hand near Auschwitz, in reserve to back up the guard staff in the event of mass escapes,¹⁴ the citizenry living in the vicinity of those camps inside Germany formed a potential auxiliary force to be armed in a similar emergency. In Mauthausen, in fact, on a moonlit night in early February 1945, a group of some four hundred badly weakened Soviet prisoners of war, under sentence of slow death in an isolation barrack in the main camp, miraculously succeeded in scaling one of the walls of the camp. Those who were not immediately cut down by gunfire succeeded in scattering into the countryside. They desperately sought morsels of food and help at the doorways of the local citizenry in Mauthausen and surrounding villages and towns in the area; they begged not to be turned in to the SS. According to the written account of the local police commander, these men, even in their desperate situation, did not do harm to persons or property. They asked only that citizens allow them, for a brief while, to hide in their farm buildings. But a manhunt was immediately called up by the SS and local Nazi party officials. Aged men and teenage boys not yet eligible for army service were assembled and armed to participate. The citizenry had been, in effect, deputized to act as killers. By all accounts, numerous citizens—and not only men, for farm women and women shopkeepers took a hand in this as well—thoughtlessly seized the opportunity to participate in the sport of

chasing and killing. In hunting down the inmates—with guns and knives and pitchforks—the local citizenry revealed unmistakably that the surrounding communities were in fact extensions of the camp.¹⁵

The concentration and extermination camps called forth particular ways of seeing.¹⁶ It is precisely because the camps were in fact constructed so close to populated areas that their designs incorporated elements of disguise and camouflage. Mauthausen was able to take advantage of the natural, semicircular enclosure of its rock quarry, the very center of operations, and to have built for the prisoner compound, assembled on a height overlooking the quarry, thick walls made of stones hauled up from the pit below. In Treblinka, a camp of relatively lighter construction, the SS had to make do with earthen bafflers and with wire, but here care was taken to weave foliage into the mesh to obstruct the vision not only of the victims themselves but of anyone looking in on the camp from surrounding fields. At Sobibor and Treblinka the forest was similarly used as a natural barrier to sight. Enhancing these natural shields were a host of improvised and inexpensive additions whose major purpose was to mislead or to conceal from view what went on inside or near the camps. We are reminded that the killers also experimented at Treblinka with the by now familiar stage-set deception of a Potemkin-like village railway station complete with its "fake clock" and "fake ticket windows."¹⁷ The buses that drove the victims to the gassing center at Castle Hartheim had their windows painted over; passengers were to be prevented from looking out, outsiders from looking in. Also at Hartheim a wooden canopy was placed at the entrance where buses pulled up and unloaded those about to be led to their deaths in the gas chamber inside the castle.¹⁸

There were, of course, euphemisms for murder built into the linguistic codes enforced in the verbal commands and in the correspondence of the bureaucrats. Radically new techniques of distancing were effected for the perpetrators on the scene, however, with the substitution of mobile and fixed gas killing devices for the previously relied upon killing squads, whose victims had been lined up before their eyes. This was critical, because it helped to remove most of the killers from the line of sight.¹⁹ Shoshana Felman, however, in her salient review of the Lanzmann film, suggests that similar restrictions of visual encounters, above and beyond those ingeniously developed to protect the sensibilities of the killers, played a critical role in safeguarding the bystanders from the act of witnessing, helping them, too, to avoid seeing with their own eyes things that in fact were happening within range of their senses. Combined with ruses aimed at deceiving the victims of their fate, deliberately sparing them until the final instant the site of the pit at the edge of a forest or the interior of the sealed gassing room, perpetrators and bystanders, in narrowing their vision, acceded to a process that was designed to make the killing "invisible" and to make of the Holocaust "*an event without a witness*, an event

which historically consists in the scheme of the literal *erasure of its witnesses*.²⁰

Primo Levi is one of our best guides to the implications of these strategies of visual and other sensory avoidances. It was he who wrote of the "cordon sanitaire" people may draw up around those things they wish not to see; nothing so effectively protects one against later unpleasant memories of a sight or an experience than does not looking at the moment it presents itself before one's field of vision. By not seeing, by turning away, one is already selecting one's memories, screening those memories, and hence screening oneself from unpleasant and potentially bothersome thoughts in the future.²¹

Still, we have come to recognize that the bystanders, to the extent that they participated in this process of blocking disturbing sensations associated with the activities of the camps, did so against a background of numerous, often unavoidable daily contacts with these institutions. We discover that in negotiating such interactions, residents of the communities bordering on the camps often collaborated in narrowing their vision to a minimum. In 1941 a woman whose farm lay on a height above the rock quarry in Mauthausen filed an anguished request with the police after witnessing bodies of inmates who had been shot and left in the open. Indicating that the sight of inmates lying dead at the rock quarry was burdensome to her nerves, she was compelled to ask that the killing be halted or at least done elsewhere and out of sight.²² The priest from Ebensee who arrived at the end of the war to enter the liberated camp wrote in 1946 that he had spoken with residents of the town, discovering not only women whose nerves suffered because of the unavoidable sights and sounds of persons being beaten, but also farmers who avoided working certain fields too near to the camp, and mountaineers who went out of their way just in order to avoid coming into contact with such "horrifying events."²³

People had some control over what they saw, and could try to look away, but what of what they smelled? The stench was simply unavoidable for persons living near camps that had operating crematoria, as in Mauthausen and its main subsidiaries in Melk and Ebensee. Smoke respected no absolute boundaries. The unmistakable, sickly sweet odor of burning human flesh was, as townsfolk readily admit, a part of the atmosphere. Read enough testimonies to this effect and one learns that these people, undoubtedly already experts in the vagaries of the local climate, had become veritable specialists in detecting the interaction between wind and cremation fumes.²⁴ Approximately thirty kilometers from Nuremberg, in the vicinity of the Hersbruck camp, subsidiary to the Flossenbürg main camp, a crematorium whose "chimney stood clear of obstructing terrain features" was available to the sight of "all who traveled the two valley roads to the market town of Hersbruck from the south." As the wife of a local minister noted, "From our house one had a view down the valley to Happurg and beyond. One

could see smoke pouring out the chimney on a low brick building. Often when I opened the door in the morning there would be an awful smell. It was always the same. At different times I said to my husband, 'There's that awful smell again.'" Also established in the area were two open pyres, one of which was located on "a hilltop site" fed by "wood being requisitioned from farmers" in the area. Those working their fields came across the sight of bodies being incinerated. Another woman noted, "One evening one of my sons came running into the house and shouted, 'Mama the woods are on fire.' Sometimes the flames were so high that it looked as if the trees were burning. Whenever they were burning bodies the smell was awful, and when the wind brought the smoke toward Molsberg it was terrible."²⁵

Characteristically, the SS attempted to explain away the unmaskable odors. The explanations were designed to permit persons to ignore, rationalize, or cancel these sensations by offering a more palatable interpretation. Immediately after the crematorium in Hartheim went into operation a representative of the castle administration assembled residents in a tavern to try to convince people that in fact the heavy smoke was the result of a war-related "chemical treatment" for processing oil for use in submarines.²⁶ Similarly, the SS at first attempted to explain away open-air cremation at one of the pyres in the Hersbruck area by first restricting access to the area and stating that "an Allied plane had crashed there."²⁷ For those who wished to believe so, there existed rationales for the burning of bodies in wartime. A woman from Melk who remembered the smoke recalled, "I said, 'uh huh, someone is being burned again.' One smells that you know. That is, I believe none were shot in Melk. They often simply died of hunger or something. They often died of weakness."²⁸

To those who looked away, the towns beside the camps embodied goodness and decency. In Mauthausen the local Nazis and camp staffers mingled at recitals, lectures, youth assemblies, sporting competitions, and hunts. Here the executioners found relaxation in local taverns and with some of the local women at private gatherings held in farmhouses. Here resided the wives and children of SS family men; here were the shopkeepers—hairdressers, druggists, grocery owners—whom they patronized. Above all, here resided the decent folk, as opposed to the outcasts and criminals sealed within the walls of the camp. One is pained to read the words of a wife whose husband, a dentist, oversaw the removal and preparation of gold extracted from the teeth of inmates at Mauthausen before shipment to Berlin. In June 1946, pleading for his life, she stated, "He was always a devoted husband who valued his family above anything else and I love him with all my heart." And she continued, "The children are too small to beg for their father. I enclose a picture of the children in the hope that their innocent eyes will plead with you and save their father from death by hanging. Furthermore, I enclose a picture of my husband showing him as a happy family man. Please look at his eyes. You will see in them how

good and unselfish he is and that he does not belong among the criminals of Mauthausen."²⁹ From this to Heinrich Himmler's SS men of 1943 who, in his words, "apart from exceptions caused by human weakness . . . have remained decent fellows" to the defiant remarks of Austrian presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim, defending in the year 1986 "the reputation of a whole generation" against the attack of those who would "make all these people bad people," the upholding of goodness was essential. "We were not doing anything but our duty as decent soldiers, we were not criminals but decent men who faced a terrible fate."³⁰

We confront repeatedly a binary vision permitting alternate versions of the self: the perpetrator who is simultaneously the caring family man; the bystander, the honored citizen of a town that is a town like any other save that it also serves a killing establishment. The two sides of the self, however, cannot be neatly separated. Each person trails, close by, his shadow.³¹ So, too, the camp, bounded as it was by stone and by wire, patrolled by guards, cast its presence upon the nearby towns, its inmates at once confined within, yet also routinely led through neighboring communities; killing went on within its walls, but not exclusively, and the remains of the dead, let loose, rode the breeze. Lines were sharply drawn, yet never absolute and impermeable.

Not all townsfolk took up instruments to strike directly at the inmates; some of the former took refuge in a spurious neutrality. It was of no small comfort to know that one did not kill; one was not a murderer, one concluded, so long as one's own hand did not strike down a life. But to allow matters to rest at that overlooked the simple fact that the rulers of the concentration camps asked, at a minimum, but one thing of the residents of these bordering communities: not to interfere, so that the SS could proceed with their tasks. In complying, assuming what amounted to an attitude of noninvolvement, they not only made life easier for the executioners but denied the inmates what they most needed: assistance from the outside world. As we know, one can contribute to evil as easily by thoughtlessness as by deed. That lesson is one not readily acknowledged, as the philosopher Mary Midgley is at pains to point out: "If we ask whether exploiters and oppressors know what they are doing, the right answer seems to be that they do *not* know, because they carefully avoid thinking about it—but that they could know, and therefore their deliberate avoidance is a responsible act."³²

Throughout the years the bystanders have been reluctant to come forward. Like the perpetrators, they have no reason to speak; what is more, they preferred to forget the past. Have we waited too long to approach them? Claude Lanzmann conducted his interviews in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. It was not too late at that time, but is it too late now? I recall that as a college student I had been influenced greatly by William Sheridan Allen's by now classic history of the rise of the Nazi party in a single German town.³³ But the book I really wanted to read did not exist: a study of a town

that was located near a concentration camp. By the time I took the chance on such an undertaking in the succeeding decade, more than thirty-five years had passed since the end of the Second World War. And now the war is half a century behind us, not a great span for most historians; measured against the course of an individual life, however, fifty years is indeed a long time. Many adult witnesses from that era have slipped away, silent in their own lifetimes, and now silent in death. But one of the things my investigation of Mauthausen made me aware of was that there were not only adults but also children who viewed what went on from the periphery of the camps. Indeed, in some instances they were afforded a closer look at things, for the guards were less likely to threaten or chase them away. Born during the years, roughly, 1928–1933, they are only now approaching retirement, or would be just recently retired. In the year 1943, such persons would have been between ten and fifteen years old, certainly old enough, had they lived near one of these places, to have seen the camps. Even someone born as long ago as 1923 would have celebrated in 1993 no more than his or her seventieth year. No, it is not too late. The witnesses are still among us. Or, at the least, they are still in their home towns, many of them. Shall we not ask of them what they saw, what they heard for themselves, and what their parents may have seen and heard and said? And in so doing we can find among them and among later generations valuable allies: local historians, archivists in the Second World War research institutes, Gymnasium teachers who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. They are a ready resource, often with ties to the towns where the camps were located, helpful in locating contacts in these communities. Peter Sichrovsky's success in interviewing the children of perpetrators and victims underscores the need to speak with the children of the bystanders as well.³⁴

In the meantime, we await the development of a new imagination, akin to that "imagination of the heart" which, Karl Jaspers noted, when missing, leaves the individual open to moral "blindness" and "inner indifference toward the witnessed evil."³⁵ Still, we have before us the example of Jan Karski, a man whose vision was, however painful to him, directed to taking in with his eyes all that he needed to see, that he might bear witness to the crime before the world. He sought out what was human in those he encountered. And in the figure of Szymon Zygielbojm, a Jewish leader with whom Karski spoke when he reached London, we find an example of one who responded to Karski's message with all his heart. With the messenger, Zygielbojm was a man seeking to place himself, a man at a distance, far away in London, with Karski in the ghetto. Zygielbojm pressed his witness for precise descriptions: "He asked me what the houses looked like, what the children looked like."³⁶ The vision he sought was internal; it was the vision of the mind's eye.

In the year 1944 Arthur Koestler wrote of a man he knew, "a well-known London publisher," who had taken upon himself the task of reporting on the destruction of the Jews:

Before each meeting he used to lock himself up in a room, close his eyes, and imagine in detail, for twenty minutes, that he was one of the people in Poland who were killed. One day he tried to feel what it was like to be suffocated . . . ; the other he had to dig his grave with two hundred others and then face a machine gun, which, of course, is rather imprecise and capricious in its aiming. Then he walked out to the platform and talked. He kept going for a full year before he collapsed with a nervous breakdown. He had a great command of his audiences and perhaps he has done some good,

concluded Koestler.³⁷

Agonized that year by a recurring dream in which he found himself left to die as others indifferently walked past, Koestler acknowledged that there are degrees of knowing: "I believe in spiral nebulae, can see them in a telescope and express their distance in figures; but they have a lower degree of reality for me than the inkpot on my table. Distance in space and time degrades intensity of awareness."³⁸ Günther Anders, in his parable of a woman who, from the height of a tower, witnesses the death of her child, then exclaims, had she but been down below she would have been overwhelmed, expressed, chillingly, a like notion.³⁹ But not only does distance diminish perception,

So does magnitude. Seventeen is a figure which I know intimately like a friend; fifty billion is just a sound. A dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; three million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness. Statistics don't bleed; it is the detail which counts. We are unable to embrace the total process with our awareness; we can only focus on little lumps of reality.⁴⁰

Karski was a rare individual, as were at this time Zygielbojm, Koestler, and the London publisher he mentions. Few were willing to suffer the unpleasant sensation of dwelling on such matters. It was not always the case, Koestler noted:

There were periods and moments in history—in Athens, in the early Renaissance, during the first years of the Russian Revolution—when at least certain representative layers of society had attained a relatively high level of mental integration; times when people seemed to rub their eyes and come awake, when their cosmic awareness seemed to expand, when they were 'contemporaries' in a much broader and fuller sense; when the trivial and the cosmic planes seemed on the point of fusing.⁴¹

We are not there yet; we can only look forward to such a time when sensibilities are more refined, when each of us, in approaching both present and past, learns to have the courage to see, even when, safe within our homes, within ourselves, we "rub [our] eyes and come awake" to sense this world far away close to us, and a part of us.

But in so doing let us acknowledge that we awaken upon this world, not an underworld, and recall that among the rivers that course its landscape are the fabled Danube, which, just east of Linz, bathes the shores of a place called Mauthausen, and lesser ones, among them the River Ner, a body of water as real as the mightiest and proudest of all Europe's riverways, which drinks the ashes of a place called Chełmno.

NOTES

- 1 Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944), p. 329.
- 2 Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, pp. 325–26, 329–30; Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 174.
- 3 Lanzmann, *Shoah*, p. 174.
- 4 Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 10.
- 5 Franz Loidl, *Entweihete Heimat* (Linz, 1946), pp. 15–16.
- 6 See the discussion entitled "Total Domination" in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd enl. ed. (New York: World Publishing, A Meridian Book, 1958; 12th printing 1972), pp. 437–59. The phrase "phantom world" appears on page 445.
- 7 Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), pp. 26–27, 29, 40–41.
- 8 Ibid., p. 41; Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein, Adalbert Ruckerl et al., *Nationalsozialistische Massentötungen durch Giftgas* (Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1983), p. 248.
- 9 See the chapter entitled "The Castle" in Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, pp. 55–82.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 41, 43–44.
- 11 Yitzhad Arad, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 158–59, 163.
- 12 Rachel Auerbach, "In the Fields of Treblinka," in Alexander Donat, ed., *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), p. 69. See also Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, pp. 371, 379.
- 13 Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, pp. 342–48.
- 14 Raul Hilberg, "Bitburg as Symbol," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 22.
- 15 Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, pp. 124–27, 131–34.
- 16 Shoshana Felman speaks of "three different performances of the act of seeing," in which "in effect, the victims, the bystanders, and the perpetrators are here differentiated not so much by what they actually see (what they all see, although discontinuous, does in fact follow a logic of corroboration), as by what and how they do not see, by what and how they fail to witness" (emphasis in original) (Shoshana Felman, "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," *Yale French Studies* 79 [1991]: p. 42).
- 17 See diagram and accompanying description of the camp layout in Gitta

- Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974; Random House, Vintage Books edition, 1983), pp. 146–47.
- 18 Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, p. 72.
 - 19 See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent: II*. (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1991), p. 233.
 - 20 Felman, "In an Era of Testimony," pp. 44–45.
 - 21 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 31 (also in Hartman, *Bitburg*, p. 135).
 - 22 Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, p. 35.
 - 23 Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, *Widerstand und Verfolgung in Oberösterreich 1934–1945* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1982), vol. 2, p. 592.
 - 24 See Claude Lanzmann, "J'ai enquêté en Pologne," in *Au sujet de Shoah: Le film de Claude Lanzmann*, ed. Michel Deguy (Paris: Editions Belin, 1990), p. 214.
 - 25 Elmer Luchterhand, "Knowing and Not Knowing: Involvement in Nazi Genocide," in *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, ed. Paul Thompson with Natasha Burchardt (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), pp. 254, 264–65.
 - 26 Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, p. 62.
 - 27 Luchterhand, "Knowing and Not Knowing," p. 255.
 - 28 Horwitz, *In the Shadow*, p. 110.
 - 29 National Archives, RG 153–5–31, vol. 1. Trial record Court Dachau, pt. 5, pp. 1462ff., Case of Walther H., clemency petition dated June 12, 1946.
 - 30 Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Documents on Nazism* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 492; James M. Markham, "Waldheim Campaigns to Memories in Borderland," *New York Times*, May 1, 1986, p. 2.
 - 31 See the discussion of "Selves and Shadows" in Mary Midgley's *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), pp. 113–31; and "Doubling: The Faustian Bargain," in Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 418–29.
 - 32 Midgley, *Wickedness*, pp. 62–63.
 - 33 William S. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1942–1945*, rev. ed. (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984).
 - 34 Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
 - 35 Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p. 70.
 - 36 Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, p. 337.
 - 37 Arthur Koestler, "On Disbelieving Atrocities," *New York Times Magazine*, January 1944, cited in Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1967; 1st ed. 1945), p. 93. The publisher, whom Koestler did not identify by name, would be Victor Gollancz. See Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1987), p. 377.
 - 38 Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, pp. 91–92.
 - 39 Gunther Anders, *Der Blick vom Turm* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1968), p. 7.
 - 40 Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, p. 92.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

UNDER A CRUEL STAR

A life in Prague 1941–1968

Heda Margolius Kovály

If it is difficult to choose a suitable text by one of the perpetrators, it is all the more difficult to pick out an appropriate survivor's recollection. The number of survivor memoirs published over the years has grown tremendously. The perpetrators, for obvious reasons, rarely wished to write or talk about their experiences after the war. Only a few left behind testimonies, such as the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, who wrote his memoirs just before he was executed, and Franz Stangl, who spoke at length to Gitta Sereny while he was on trial as former commandant of Treblinka. Conversely, the survivors were often motivated by an urgent need to record the events of the past for the sake of the majority who perished and as a warning to posterity. Some memoirs were published, or at least written, very soon after the liberation. But they rarely received much attention, especially when written by "passive" victims, namely innocent Jewish inmates, rather than heroic resistance fighters. This early period was followed by a relative lull, during which survivors tried to pick up the pieces and resume their previous lives, or, in most cases, build new ones. But as of the 1970s we are witnessing a new wave of publications and a tremendous rise in public interest. Survivors who feel that they will soon no longer be able to tell their stories now find a public far more willing to listen than in the past. Obviously, this influx in publications will have a limited duration, as the survivors are rapidly dying out. But it reflects the extent of memory's reach and potency fifty years after the event, as well as the changing sensibilities of a public, the majority of whom had not even been born at the time.

The reasons I chose Heda Margolius Kovály's memoirs are complex. For one, her account is far less known than those which nowadays (but only since the late 1980s) are read by almost every college student, such as Primo Levi's or Elie Wiesel's. For another, she is a woman, whereas most readers are more familiar with accounts written by men. But there are other reasons as well. Margolius Kovály writes with extraordinary conciseness and precision, insight and sensibility. She packs into a brief account a series of scenes and pictures that the reader will never forget, and which seem to contain a gist of her own experience and of many fellow victims. Moreover, while she is victimized as a Jew by the Nazis, her suffering does not come